

ON EQUAL GROUND A DOMESTIC TALE

By JANE BELFIELD

WHAT are you writing so furiously, Helen?"

The woman glanced around, balancing her pen for a moment as she answered carelessly, "Oh—a letter—to your uncle."

"Uncle?—But he's just gone. Didn't you tell him all you had to say?"

"Didn't I tell him—tell him? Tell that puffed up, old whited sepulchre, the real truth about anything? Why, George—I've just given you an exact account of our whole conversation. Did it sound like what I really think? You couldn't have done better if you had been home yourself."

"I couldn't have done half so well, little girl." The man threw his half-smoked cigar in the library grate. "I should have lost my temper and shouted back at him. They hear us all over the counting house when we are at it in his private office—the old man shouts and I shout. The new stenographer asked yesterday whether we were both deaf. But—he riles me so, I can't hold in."

"You'd better begin to try then, dear—you'd better take Uncle John as an awful warning. For pity's sake—are you going to grow like him? How long have you two been in business together?" Helen puckered her brows, anxiously regarding the man opposite, as she laid aside her pen.

"Well," reflectively, "I had been fifteen years with uncle, when we were married. That makes altogether twenty years this spring since I ran away from school, and the old man said he'd give me work if it was work I wanted! And, by Jove—he has—ever since! He started me on two-fifty a week—you know mother and I lived with him—so I had to pay back the two for board—and the fifty cents was my private and princely allowance. Mother always regarded uncle as a sort of superior being because he was successful in business; and poor dad seemed to be only a maker of failures—wild goose schemes that never came to anything—for lack of money perhaps. And I was all she had—so I kept at it. And now here I am—thirty-seven years old, with a wife and a young one—and the old curmudgeon still doles me out a miserable pittance and actually comes here to preach economy to you!"

"Well, as long as we are dependent upon him and you've given the best years of your life to the business, we've got to stand it, dear. Yet one would think that with no children of his own and you his only nephew, he'd be proud of you and even glad to trust things to you!"

THE man rose to his feet with a contemptuous laugh. "Proud of me!" he began irritably. "He—proud of me? Why, if anything goes right, it is all due to his superior wisdom and management—but when things go wrong—that is my confounded blundering! I ought to have cut it long ago—it's too late now. He's got us where he wants us—under his thumb—and when that's the case with him the thumb always comes heavily down!"

"I don't know about that, George." The woman slowly shook her little head as she rose and laid her hand on his shoulder. "I am not so sure it is too late. Money can't buy everything. Perhaps you owe it to your own self-respect to assert yourself now and show what you can do. I know what it must be to work under a man like that," she hesitated—"and it hasn't helped you any in ways that you wouldn't like me to speak about. Sometimes—you know—well, dear—even at home—with the baby and even sometimes to me—I'm sure you don't intend to—but—" she stopped abruptly.

"Oh, I know! You mean I'm a regular old bear—irritable and all that—well, we do have occasional spats, Helen—but not more than the rest of the world. It's the usual thing—my dear girl—quite to be expected in the ordinary round of existence. I'm—well—human."

Helen smiled and clasped her hands over his folded arms. "Oh, I'm not blaming you, George. I'm only suggesting. But—" seriously, "we do mean that our marriage shall be more than the common round of petty squabbles, don't we, dear? I know Uncle John is provoking enough. Why, he blamed me today for our 'extravagance'—as he calls it. He even said if I wanted to be a 'true helpmate' I had better reform my methods."



His wife stood at the nursery door, silently regarding him with a look of utter discouragement.

"Really? So kind! And what did the old man suggest, dearie? Are you to take in washing—while he sits in the office with his feet up and reads the paper and I run his business?"

"No—not exactly that. But I might do without a nursemaid, he thinks, and make my own clothes and we could stay at home this summer."

"Yes—while he takes a trip around the world! Confound his impudence!"

THE woman laid one finger gently on the man's lips. "Softly, Georgie—gray hairs, you know."

"I believe they are said to be a crown of glory when found in the paths of righteousness." Surely you'd never accuse uncle of that."

"Ah—there's just the point, George. He thinks he's right. He always thinks he's right."

"Oh—of course—but that's no excuse. So do the mothers who throw their babies under the Jugernaut. I think I'm right. Come—let's see the letter you wrote to him just now."

"Certainly—I intend to show it to you—but there's a word of explanation first, dear."

"Yes?" The man leaned against the mantle, watching her with an amused smile.

"Oh, I'm serious, George. I read the other day about a woman who was noted for her remarkably sweet disposition. She never said anything ugly—she never hurt anybody's feelings—she never was out of temper."

"Must have been you, Helen." He reached down and pressed the slender fingers, busily twisting the long silk fringe of the mantle scarf.

"Oh, but this isn't a joke, George! Yes—she was truly all of that. But how do you suppose she managed to keep it up?"

"Had an agreeable, considerate, obliging husband, I suppose?"

"I don't know about that, dear—no, I think this woman very often had just cause to be unpleasant."

But she never said anything disagreeable to anybody's face—she immediately sat down by herself and wrote out what she thought—yes—exactly what she thought, and to the very person who had just hurt or offended her. In that way she worked the bile out of her system. Of course she never sent the letters."

"And is this the sort of a letter you were writing to dear uncle?"—with an appreciative grin.

Helen nodded. "Yes—I'm going to try that woman's plan. I want to keep sweet—if I can. He did upset me terribly. So I've written it all out. But you must remember when you read that I was very polite and very attentive to him when he was here."

"Oh, yes—you'd have to be. I know! The whole place knuckles to him. He's used to it. He never stops to think that it's all done for what they get out of him."

HELEN handed her husband the letter, watching his face closely as he read aloud:

"You old hypocrite! So you think you own us, do you, when you pay George fifty dollars a week, although he ought to have half the business anyhow? And you come here to tell me how I should economize—because you once did so and so yourself? It's no disgrace to you what you once did, or did without—I'm glad you had enough ability to get out of it. But George isn't a poor man. I didn't marry a poor man. If he had been obliged to come in the back way and take his meals in the kitchen, he'd have been courting the cook—not me!"

"How wise you think you are and how little you guessed that as you sat opposite to me just now—thinking you were boss of the situation—I really pitied you! Yes—pitied you! You're such a hopelessly blind case—you need so badly what there is nobody to give you—the lesson that you'll never get! I thought to myself wonderingly, as you looked around with an air of open disapproval, 'He really thinks he is right.'

"Well, father used to say there were two kinds of hypocrites; those who knew that they were and those who did not know it. I understand him now—but you are the first hypocrite I ever met who belonged to the second variety."

"Suppose my George grows to be like you? Horrors! And to think we've named the baby after you! Well, I know to which class of hypocrites George and I belong! But we're very uncomfortable there—it doesn't fit us. We thought it would give the boy a start in life—that you'd do something great for him."

"And you did—you sent him a silver mug with his initials on! I'd have changed his name then if he hadn't been already baptized!"

"George laughed, 'So that's what young John gets from old John!' 'From the old Nick!' I answered. Oh, why can't I tell you what I think of you! If you would only go where you belong—to the old Nick!"

THE man threw down the letter. "Why, Nell," seizing her hands, "congratulations! I didn't think it was in you. Are you going to post this now?"

"Yes," she smiled back, "here!" and threw the paper on the red coals. "Now I am restored to order—'clothed and in' my 'right mind.'"

A discreet knock, and they turned to see the new cook standing apologetically in the doorway.

"Mem—kin Oi spake wid you, mem?"

"Yes, Nora—what is it?"

The man took up his paper and went out of the library humming a lively tune.

"Oi give me notice, mem," began the woman briskly.

"Why, Nora—what's wrong?"

"Nawthin's roight, mem. Nawthin's what's a cook's place, mem. I ain't used to ut! I ain't supposed to shwape the poorch. I ain't willin' at ahl, at ahl to come in the dinin' room whin the baaby cries. I objects to the noorse, mem. She hoong the baaby's things in the kitchen this mornin', she did thot."

"But it rained, Nora—and we have no laundry."

"I can't help thot, mem. I don't want to be where there's no baaby, at ahl, mem."